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ABSTRACT

Policy memo that provides a brief description of the Associate of Arts/Oregon Transfer degree (AA/OT) program and proposes policy options intended to address current program limitations. Under the direction of Oregon Legislative Assembly, officials from the community college and university sectors developed and implemented a set of general requirements for a block-transfer degree. Any student who completes an Oregon community college Associate of Arts/Oregon Transfer degree and who transfers to an institution in the Oregon University System has met the lower-division general education requirements of the university's baccalaureate degree programs. The author asserts that despite the transfer program's popularity within the transfer-student landscape of Oregon, the program presents significant limitations for those students who enter the community college with specific career goals and, as a result, could benefit from a more individualized curriculum. Some of the problematic issues with the degree include: campus-to-campus variability, sequence requirements, advising issues, and community college to community college transfer. The policy memo concludes with recommendations to improve the AA/OT initiative. Examples include mandating uniform implementation of the current AA/OT, improving the advising function of community colleges, and establishing a statewide, standardized, transferable, lower-division general education curriculum. (RC)

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Do We Need to "Fix" the Associate of Arts/Oregon Transfer Degree?

by James C. Arnold, Ph.D., for the Joint Boards Articulation Commission

ED 477 582

Introduction and Purpose

Community college students in the State of Oregon have had, for over a decade, the opportunity to earn an Associate of Arts/Oregon Transfer (AA/OT) degree as a prelude to entry into a public baccalaureate-granting institution. The AA/OT degree was developed to ease and standardize the transfer process for students who may eventually go on to pursue a four-year degree. The purpose of this policy memo is to provide a brief history and description of the transfer degree, demonstrate its utilization, argue some of its limitations, and, finally, to propose some policy options to address those limitations.

History and Description of the Associate of Arts/Oregon Transfer Degree

The genesis of the Associate of Arts/Oregon Transfer Degree (AA/OT) was HB 2913, adopted by the Oregon Legislative Assembly in 1987 (as ORS 348.470). This law directed "cooperation between the [university system] and community colleges on issues affecting students who transfer" and the removal of "all unnecessary obstacles that restrict transfer opportunities." Toward those goals, the bill mandated a work group "to develop a set of general requirements for transfer students seeking admission to [university system] institutions that can provide a high quality curriculum."

By the late 1980s, officials from the community college and university sectors had developed and implemented a set of general requirements as a block-transfer degree, now commonly referred to as "the AA/OT." General guidelines were issued at the state level, to which the community colleges needed to conform their respective associate's degrees (see the current set of guidelines at http://www.ous.edu/aca/transferdeg.html). Any student who holds an Oregon community college Associate of Arts/Oregon Transfer degree and who transfers to an institution in the Oregon University System (OUS) has met the lower-division general education requirements of the OUS institution's baccalaureate degree programs. Course, class standing, or GPA requirements for specific majors, departments or schools are not necessarily satisfied by an Associate of Arts degree, however. Students transferring under this agreement have junior standing for registration purposes.

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The transfer degree includes a set of "general requirements" in writing, math, and oral communication/rhetoric (minimum of 15 quarter credits), as well as another set of "distribution requirements" in arts & letters, social sciences, and science/math/computer science areas (minimum 40 credits). Approximately 35 elective credits are included, depending on the courses chosen within the general- and distribution-credit groups. At least 90 (quarter) credits are required for the degree.

Transfer Activity in Oregon

Since its inception, the AA/OT has proven to be a popular program that has been taken

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advantage of by many students. Each year over three thousand students transfer to a public university from the seventeen community colleges in Oregon. The total number of admitted community college transfer students for five recent years is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Admitted Community College Transfer Students, by Academic Year

Academic Year	Admitted Transfers to the Oregon University System
96-97	3,096
97-98	3,327
99-99	3,287
99-00	3,526
00-01	3,523

Many of these students have earned the AA/OT prior to matriculation at an OUS campus. Table 2 provides the number of students graduating with an AA/OT for five consecutive years, beginning with 1995-96. The table also shows how many of those AA/OT students were enrolled in an OUS campus the following academic year.

Table 2. Students Completing an Oregon Transfer Degree (AA/OT) One Year and Then Enrolling in an Oregon University System Institution the Next

Year*	Total AA/OTs	Total AA/OTs Transferring	Percent AA/OTs Transferring	AA/OTs as Percent of Admitted Transfers
95-96/96-97	1,692	937	55.4	30.3
96-97/97-98	1,902	1,021	53.7	30.7
97-98/98-99	1,924	1,028	53.4	31.3
98-99/99-00	1,913	982	51.3	27.9
99-00/00-01	1,983	1,048	52.8	29.8

**The first year indicated is the academic year in which the AA/OTs were earned. The second year is the academic year during which those students were enrolled at an OUS campus.*

The last two columns of Table 2 indicate that consistently over half of the students earning an AA/OT in any one year have chosen to extend their education further, as demonstrated by their enrollment in an OUS campus the following year. Further, the percentage of admitted transfer students that have earned an AA/OT prior to transfer appears to have remained rather steady at about 30%.

Limitations of the Associate of Arts/Oregon Transfer Degree

Despite the AA/OT's now permanent fixture on the transfer-student landscape in Oregon, it is not without its limitations. Most would agree that the AA/OT works best for students who are undecided as to their major field of study and who are unsure about their eventual OUS transfer destination. However, for other students who are more certain of their goals, a specifically-designed and individually-tailored course of study may be more appropriate than the AA/OT. Some of the more problematic issues with this degree are

briefly outlined here.

Campus to campus variability. No two community colleges in Oregon have AA/OT degrees that are exactly alike. All community colleges have, of course, molded their degree to the statewide *general* requirements, but they have taken advantage of the flexibility provided by fashioning different degrees.

Sequence requirements. Campus to campus differences are most noticeably reflected in this aspect of the degree. Within the distribution requirements areas, many (eight of the seventeen) of the community colleges require students to complete course sequences within various disciplinary areas. The other colleges have no sequence requirements.

Community-college to community-college transfer. With the campus differences, most particularly the sequence requirements, transfer between community colleges can be problematic, especially if a student wishes to transfer to a college requiring sequences from a college that does not.

Community-college to university transfer. The AA/OT is not well-suited to some fields of study. As mentioned above, the AA/OT degree is a best fit for those students undecided with regard to major field and transfer campus. The general nature of the degree allows for maximum flexibility. However, the number of degrees of freedom allowed to students – a hallmark of the degree – may ultimately be a very serious problem for some. In general, students who pursue degrees in the physical/biological sciences, engineering, psychology, business and education may find themselves at a disadvantage with an AA/OT degree since the choices they made to earn a generalized associate's degree may not have served them well for the very specific prerequisites of a highly-specialized baccalaureate degree.

Advising issues. It is not uncommon for students to engage in a process of self-advising. The pitfalls inherent in such a system are obvious: students simply do not get the information they need, or get such information in a timely manner, to make the best decisions regarding their pursuit of a transfer degree. Another issue is the knowledge gap exhibited by some community college advisors. Although typically well versed in their own (local college's) version of the AA/OT, counselors may lack a thorough understanding of the complexities of transferring to another community college or, ultimately, to a university. As a result, students may be advised into their college's standard version of the transfer degree rather than a more customized version better suited to their individual goals. The problem is exacerbated, of course, by the propensity of students to vacillate over their subject choice and to change majors. Some community colleges have addressed the issue, in part, by developing articulation agreements with specific universities, or by developing discipline/program-specific advising guides.

OUS general education requirements. Since the AA/OT was formulated, there have been philosophical shifts at several of the universities, resulting in significant modifications to their general education requirements. The changes have commonly resulted in fewer credits demanded in the lower-division general education requirements, sometimes accompanied by the insertion of upper-division requirements that are not met by the AA/OT. A common outcome is the downward migration of the prerequisite requirements for the major.

Most students transfer without a transfer degree, even if they initially intended to receive such a degree at a community college. For those students (estimated to be 70% or more of all admitted transfers, see previous section), the diversity of general education

requirements at Oregon's universities can be a virtual minefield. Unless these students make a decision early in their first year regarding which OUS institution they will eventually attend, they may find that few of their credits effectively transfer to meet the general education requirements (although they will generally be accepted as elective credits). Students need to be mindful (and be advised) that academic preparation for one university does not necessarily lead to effective preparation for another.

Given these limitations, is it no wonder that officials in the postsecondary sectors of Oregon have been considering alternatives to the AA/OT degree?

Proposals for Addressing the AA/OT's Limitations and Facilitating Transfer

Despite the AA/OT's apparent success, several proposals have recently been under consideration by the Joint Boards Articulation Commission (JBAC) to address the transfer degree's identified limitations. A non-prioritized list of these proposals follows.

Develop a "generic" Associate of Science/Oregon Transfer Degree. Given the wide variability of the AA/OT requirements across colleges, primarily due to the differences created by sequence requirements, discussions have been under way concerning the viability of a "generic" Associate of Science transfer degree. Such a degree, it is thought, might be developed that would be more appropriate for students interested in science-oriented majors, the statewide guidelines of which could specify that colleges adopting the degree must steer away from local variants such as sequence requirements. Such a degree might also include a range of discipline-specific advising guides, with articulated acceptance of course requirements/prerequisites across a variety of science programs.

The idea of an Associate of Science transfer degree has been a particularly attractive in some disciplinary areas, as exemplified by the work that has been underway during the last two years (2001-03) to develop a discipline-specific transfer degree in the field of business (the Associate of Science/Oregon Transfer degree in Business, AS/OT-Bus). A proposal was developed by the Joint Boards Articulation Commission, in cooperation with the Statewide Business Chairs and University Deans group, that was subsequently accepted by the community colleges' Council of Instructional Administrators and the Oregon University System's Academic Council. Statewide consensus on the degree having been achieved, the JBAC sought, and received, approval by the State Board of Education for this new statewide degree on April 18, 2003.

With the adoption of one discipline-specific transfer degree, the concept of a "generic" associate of science transfer degree continues to have life, primarily as a way to address the limitations of the current AA/OT.

Mandate uniform implementation of the current AA/OT. As one of the major limitations of the current AA/OT is believed to be its non-standard implementation and the existence of sequence requirements at some colleges, the proposal has been made that the Oregon State Board of Education *direct* all colleges to adopt a degree that would conform to the generalized statewide guidelines without their specific local adaptations such as sequence (and other course) requirements.

Although such a top-down mandate would likely improve many practical concerns associated with the transfer degree, and be helpful to students, a move such as this by the State Board would be a controversial political step. The ability of the faculty to control the curriculum is a long-standing practice and there has been considerable faculty

resistance to changing sequence requirements on those campuses that require them. Additionally, the fear of loss of enrollment in certain core courses is likely a real one. The Joint Boards Articulation Commission would be taking a large step in recommending such action to the Board of Education and the Joint Boards of Education.

Endorse, develop, and initiate a petition process for students caught in AA/OT "traps." As indicated above, the differences in sequence requirements between colleges is an impediment to student progress and transfer-degree completion when a student begins a program at a non-sequence requiring community college and ultimately ends up seeking an AA/OT from a sequence-requiring college. One proposal directed at assisting students caught in this particular trap is to implement a "petition process." Presumably, a successful petitioner would be allowed to complete an AA/OT at a sequence-requiring college even though the sequence (or other contested) requirements were not met.

A petition process would undoubtedly serve the needs of a few students who find themselves in this situation. Various questions about such a process would, of course, need to be addressed, such as (1) the cost/benefit of adding another layer of bureaucracy to the transfer-degree process, and (2) making a petition process known to the students who need it.

Improve the advising function at community colleges as well as baccalaureate-granting institutions. Advising transfer students is an increasingly complex task, given the variance of student-attendance patterns (full-time vs. part-time; attending multiple institutions simultaneously; etc.), the flexibility inherent within the AA/OT degree; and the open-ended nature of advising those transferring without a degree or those with changing academic goals. Those who advise students (including full-time advisors as well as faculty members) need better information in order to more effectively assist students who begin their studies on one campus and continue them at another. More, and more complete, advising guides which are discipline- and campus-specific need to be developed, widely-distributed, and kept up-to-date.

Encourage more coherence and consistency in OUS general education requirements. As mentioned, in recent years, the lower-division general education requirements for OUS institutions have, if anything, tended to diverge. At least part of the trouble in which some transfer students find themselves (especially one that stray from an AA/OT track and transfer without the degree), could be ameliorated by increased standardization of OUS lower-division general education requirements.

Establish a statewide, standardized, transferable, lower-division general education core curriculum. Postsecondary education systems in other states, among them Arizona and Illinois, have come to agreements about the complete transferability, without credit loss, of a core curriculum. In 1991, Arizona created a 41 semester-credit block of courses that any student may transfer to meet the lower-division general education requirements at Arizona's public universities. The Arizona General Education Curriculum (AGEC) has three forms, one for liberal arts majors (AGEC-A), one for science majors (AGEC-S), and one for business majors (AGEC-B). Each version of the AGEC contains requirements in composition, mathematics, arts & humanities, social & behavioral sciences, physical & biological sciences, and other options. Similarly, the state of Illinois has created the Illinois Transferable General Education Core Curriculum (GECC). This 56-61 quarter-credit block has requirements in communications, mathematics, physical & life sciences, humanities & fine arts, and social & behavioral sciences. In both states, the general education core must be completed as a package before transfer, or each college/university decides how to apply the courses taken. However, once the core is completed, it is guaranteed, for full lower-division general-education credit, at the

receiving baccalaureate-granting institution. Such a system in Oregon may resolve some of the current issues with students who, at the present time, pursue the AA/OT and still encounter problems with the transfer process because they choose to enroll in a university before they have completed the full block-transfer degree.

Summary

The AA/OT is a very popular degree in Oregon, among both students and institutions in the postsecondary sectors. The degree is not without its limitations, however, and several "fixes" have been discussed in recent times to address the identified deficiencies. Each of the proposals described above, however, appear to possess both strengths and weaknesses in their ability to solve the inherent and identified problems.

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http://www.ous.edu/aca/TransferPolicy.htm

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